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PERUVIAN LITERATURE

The literary history of Peru may be divided into four periods of unequal length and importance. The first extends from prehistoric times down to the conquest of the great empire of the Incas by the Spaniards under the leadership of Pizarro and Almagro. In this period the ancient Peruvians reached their highest point of development along political, economic and cultural lines in the years just preceding the overthrow of the Inca theocracy, and it is to the Spanish conquerors and colonists that we owe for the most part what knowledge we have of the indigenous products of a literary nature. The second period (1535-1810) covers the long colonial régime during the greater part of which Lima with its viceregal court was the literary as well as political center of the Spanish colonies in South America. Then came the comparatively short period of the Wars of Independence (1810-1826), at the end of which Peru was put into possession of the political freedom that had been gained from Spain by the combined efforts of the Liberator of the North, Simon Bolivar, and the Liberator of the South, José de San Martín. The fourth period, the hundred years of national independence, is the most important and demands the greater part of our attention.

PRE-HISPANIC PERIOD

Of all the races indigenous to the American continent none had made greater progress toward civilization before the coming of the Europeans than the Peruvians. The only race that could be considered a rival for first place was the Mexican, superior in some ways, inferior in others. Politically, the tribal confederation of the Mexicans, dominated by the Aztecs, was a much more primitive organization than the great Peruvian empire, in which, under the ecclesiastical control of their Inca rulers, many millions of people were enjoying the advantages of a communistic form of government of the best type. Economically, too, the Peruvians had made greater progress; the domestication of animals, agricultural improvements, the development of the art of weaving, metal work, pottery, these stand as proof that if they had not yet attained a state of civilization they were very close to it. In one important particular they were surpassed by the Aztecs; the system of picture writing

invented by these would soon have developed into some kind of an alphabet, and if the discovery of an alphabet is indicative of the passage from barbarism to civilization, the Aztecs were nearer this goal than the Incas. The Peruvians had not discovered the art of writing; they did not use pictographs or hieroglyphics for the keeping of records or the preservation of literature. Archeologists with much labor and patience have been able to decipher many of the hieroglyphic tablets of the Aztecs and Mayas and have translated records of events and even fragments of literature; they have not yet succeeded in deciphering the meaning of the Peruvian *quipus*, the knotted cords and fringes of different colors by means of which the wise men, known as *Amautas*, preserved their records. It is quite apparent that the *quipu* could be of considerable service for the reckoning of accounts; and as such it is still used by illiterate Indians in certain parts of Peru. It could be used, too, for the recording of simple facts and events; its value for the preservation of literature is highly problematical.

Not having discovered, then, the art of writing by means of letters or hieroglyphs, the ancient Peruvians did not have a written literature. They did have, however, their poets and dramatists. The early chronicles of Spaniards and hispanicized Incas offer sufficient testimony to this fact and there are extant poetical compositions that undoubtedly antedate the coming of the Spanish. These chroniclers tell us that certain of the *Amautas* or wise men were the official poets, the *harahuecs*, who dedicated themselves to the art of poetry or its preservation by tradition. The most popular form of poetry was the *yarahui*, treating of historic events, heroic deeds of the kings or other Incas, or giving lyric expression to amorous emotions. Most of the poems preserved are of this last class, so that the *yaravi*, the Spanish form of the word, has come to mean a love lyric. It has been imitated successfully by Peruvian poets of the nineteenth century.

Quechua, the language of the most important race conquered by the Incas, had already become the official language of the Empire and is still the language of many Peruvian Indians. It was a flexible language with a rich vocabulary, well adapted to the needs of poetry and drama. The conciseness of phrasing and the directness of image that seem characteristic of Quechua poetry should appeal to our Imagist poets.

References to plays that were popular in Peru before the arrival

of the Spaniards are to be found in the early chronicles; unfortunately these plays have disappeared. Of the few that are still extant all but one would seem to have been written after the Spanish conquest. Translations of Spanish plays or original compositions written by priests as an aid to the teaching of christianity can hardly be considered as examples of Quechua dramatic literature. The one exception, *Ollanta*, has divided all students of ancient Peruvian life and culture into two opposing camps: on the one side are those who hold the theory that this drama was composed in pre-Columbian times and is therefore proof of the advanced culture of the ancient Peruvians; on the other side is the smaller group of more scholarly writers who refuse antiquity to this Quechua play and hold the belief that it was composed after the conquest, even as late as the 18th century.

Quite aside from the date of its composition, *Ollanta* is an interesting play in its subject matter and in the manner of treatment. The action turns on the love of a chieftain of humble birth, Ollanta, for the daughter of the great Inca Emperor Pachacutic, who reigned during the first half of the 15th century. The audacity of one not of the Inca race in daring to gain the love of a princess of the royal blood is punished with dismissal from the court and the princess is thrown into a dark dungeon. In his resentment Ollanta gathers about him an army of rebels, fortifies himself in a stronghold about twelve leagues from Cuzco and defies the Inca Emperor. After many years he is captured, treacherously, and is taken back a prisoner to Cuzco. In the meantime the daughter of Ollanta and the princess has discovered her mother's imprisonment, and Tupac Yupanqui, the new Inca Emperor, is persuaded to pardon the lovers and bless their marriage.

The play consists of three acts and many scenes. The action shifts frequently between Cuzco and the fortress Ollanta-Tambo, about twelve leagues distant. The form is poetic, the usual verse containing eight syllables. The variety and complexity of the rimes and the rhythm of the verses show the author's mastery of the resources of a flexible language.

The oldest manuscript of the play is that of a Spanish priest, Dr. Antonio Valdés, who lived in Peru in the second half of the 18th century. Whether he took it down from oral tradition, or copied it from an old manuscript, or was himself the author of the play, is still a matter of controversy; until this question is settled the historic

importance of the drama is uncertain. A scholarly presentation of the whole matter is to be found in an article by Professor E. J. Hills, "The Quechua Drama, Ollanta," *Romanic Review*, April-June 1914. After a careful analysis of all the evidence for and against its antiquity, Professor Hills gives as his conclusion that it could not have been composed before the Spanish conquest, that the weight of evidence favors the eighteenth century as the date of its composition and Valdés as its author.

II. COLONIAL PERIOD

During the first years of conquest and colonization literary production or indeed any kind of intellectual activity could hardly be expected. The overthrow of the Inca dynasty, the subjugation and conversion of the Indians, the civil wars that grew out of the selfish rivalry of the Spanish conquerors, the organization of the political and religious machinery of government left little time for literary pursuits. The surprising thing is that attention should have been given to intellectual matters so early in the life of the colony. Lima, the capital of the Vice-royalty, had not yet twenty years of existence when in 1551 the University of San Marcos was founded by a royal charter with all the rights and privileges of the famous old university of Salamanca. Founded eighty-five years before the oldest university in the English colonies, San Marcos has exerted a strong influence upon the intellectual and cultural life of Peru for almost four centuries and possesses an abundance of traditions of which any nation could well be proud. The first printing press was set up in Lima in 1583 and at least ten books printed before the end of the sixteenth century have been preserved for the delight of bibliophiles. Most of the ten have to do with the religious instruction of the indigenous Peruvians; only one belongs to literature, an epic poem dealing with the conquest of Chile.

Poetry was cultivated in the second half of the sixteenth century but without any notable success. The epic poems treating of the conquest were quite unworthy of the heroic deeds they celebrated and were immeasurably inferior to the great epic in which the Spanish poet Ercilla made famous the wars between the Spaniards and the Araucanian Indians of Chile.

It is in prose literature that we find adequate treatment of the heroic exploits of the *conquistadores* and of the Inca civilization that had to give way to that of Spain; and it is fitting that the one who

was able to treat this epic material with truly epic splendor should be a descendant of the two races. Garcilaso de la Vega, known as the Inca to distinguish him from the Spanish lyric poet of the same name, was the son of a Spanish conqueror and a princess of the royal line of Incas. Born in 1539 in the Old Inca capital, he had access to documents of a transient nature and was able to obtain orally from those who had taken part in the stirring events of the conquest valuable material for his chronicles. The greatest of these, a recognized literary masterpiece, was his *Comentarios Reales del Perú*, published in two parts, one being a commentary on the history and civilization of the Incas, the other giving the story of the Spanish conquest and consequent civil wars.

The scientific investigations of modern historians have weakened Garcilaso's reputation as an historian and much of the responsibility for the many misconceptions that have long been current regarding the civilization of the Incas has been put upon his *Comentarios Reales*. His glowing account of the political and social conditions in Peru under the rule of his maternal ancestors, his creative imagination and ardent enthusiasm, his literary ability as a master of Spanish prose gained for his most important work an unwarranted place of importance among the chronicles treating of Peru. These same qualities make of it a literary masterpiece. Combining as it does the local color and spirit of the indigenous Peruvians with the best elements of Spanish prose literature, it is one of the most genuinely American productions of the New World.

During the latter part of the sixteenth century and the first years of the seventeenth many eminent Spaniards living in Peru composed poetry of considerable value; although their productions do not belong to Peruvian literature, their influence was important in the cultivation of literature by the creoles, native Peruvians born of Spanish parents, and of the *mestizos*, Peruvians of mixed Spanish and Indian descent. Among these *criollos* and *mestizos* two have attracted much attention because of the high literary qualities of their poetry and because of the inability of literary historians to establish the identity of the authors. The two poems in question, *Discurso en Loor de la Poesía* and the *Epístola de Amarilis a Belardo*, were each signed with a feminine *nom de plume*. The first presents with much learning and poetical insight a treatise on the art of poetry in the abstract and a critical commentary upon the art as it was then practiced in Peru. Until recently there was little

doubt that the author was a woman. Recent critics are inclined to doubt that a woman could have possessed the remarkable learning and literary ability evidenced by the poem in an age and country in which no attention was given to the education of women. It has been suggested that a Spanish poet living in Peru, Diego Mexía, whose praises are sung in one part of the poem, was the author. A comparison of its literary qualities with those of Mexía's poetry gives weight to the contention that he himself was the author and that self-laudation was the reason why he concealed his identity under the pen-name Clarisa.

The second poem, in the form of an epistle, expresses with deep emotion and fine poetic sentiment the love of a Peruvian woman for the great dramatist-poet of Spain, Lope de Vega. If it was indeed composed by a woman, Peru might well boast of a poetess equal to the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz. There are critics, however, who seem to delight in taking romance out of literary history, and one of them has recently advanced the opinion that the author of the poem was not a woman living in the small Andean town of León de Huánuco, that it was written by one of the male admirers of Lope de Vega, who thus wished to gain the dramatist's attention by appealing to his well-known gallantry. The poem drew an interesting response from Lope and remains, whoever its author, one of the most genuinely poetical compositions of the colonial period.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offer proof of a great expenditure of literary energy and learning with very little of permanent value to show for it. There are two main reasons for these disappointing results. The literature of Peru naturally reflected the bad literary taste that was already undermining the literature of the mother country in the seventeenth century and preparing the way for the utter decadence of the early eighteenth. The affectations, the intentional obscurities, the far-fetched conceits and other evidences of literary bad taste known as Gongorism passed readily from Spain to her colonies in America and made difficult, if not impossible, the production in Peru of literature worthy of permanent record. The second adverse influence was the complete domination of the Roman Catholic Church in the intellectual and spiritual life. Through its very efficient instrument, the Holy Inquisition, the church succeeded in suppressing all natural spontaneity, all vigor of sentiment and imagination. The strict censorship in the importation and printing of books kept new or unconventional ideas

from becoming current and the risk of facing the tribunal of the Holy Inquisition on the charge of heresy made unpopular any attempt to express such ideas. Personal freedom of action was permissible if kept within the limits of outward conformity to the orthodox teachings and formalities of the Church. This suppression of originality and productive thought was accompanied by other conditions unfavorable to serious literature. The exclusion of creoles and *mestizos* from government positions discouraged ambition in the great majority of educated people in the country; this and the concentration of wealth and luxury in the viceregal capital made it easy for the native aristocracy to spend their time and energy in voluptuous ease and wholly sensual pleasures.

Because of the absolute control of the Church in all matters intellectual and cultural, and because of the atmosphere of luxury and frivolous enjoyment, the production of literature came to be merely an intellectual pastime, a kind of mental gymnastics. Gongoristic poets tried to outdo each other in literary technique, in novelty of expression and cleverness of conceits; pedantic prose writers made a great show of learning in their ceaseless repetition of conventional ideas, the only ones that the ecclesiastic censors would permit them to print.

Near the end of the seventeenth century we come unexpectedly upon a refreshing vein of spontaneous poetry, realistic and satirical. The author, Caviedes, saw the humorous side of life in the viceregal city and put down what he saw with the malicious wit that has come to be considered the most notable characteristic of Peruvian literature. The keen shafts of satire that he directed fearlessly against Gongoristic poets and pedantic prose writers, against those high in authority in church and state, against the sham and hypocrisy of the life of his time circulated surreptitiously in many manuscript copies.

This vein of genuine poetry soon petered out. The eighteenth century saw some improvement in literary taste through the imitation of neo-classic models, but the other adverse conditions remained, some of them in aggravated form. The ecclesiastic censorship continued its repression of all originality or independence of thought; life in the colonial capital became more ostentatiously ceremonial; materialism reigned supreme. The wealth that had accumulated in Lima during the long period in which the political power of Spain in South America had been centralized in that city accustomed the

people to a luxurious mode of living equal to that of any European city. Under the cloak of religion flourished all the vices of a materialistic age. The viceroys, some of them poets themselves, encouraged literature and the fine arts with their generous patronage. An abundance of poetry was written; lacking spirituality and wholly artificial, it has little interest for the modern reader. Of the many writers that lived in Lima during the first half of the eighteenth century, the most eminent was Peralta Barnuevo, looked up to by his contemporaries as a universal genius. Encyclopedic in the extent of his learning, he displayed in the seventy volumes of his prose and poetry the omnivorous intellectual curiosity of the French philosophers; unfortunately his affectations and pedantry vitiated all his voluminous work in letters and science.

If only one name is to be mentioned for the second half of the eighteenth century, it will be that of a man whose contributions to literature were slight, but one whose brilliant intellectual gifts and picturesque career attracted much attention throughout the literary world. The name of this man, perhaps the most famous Peruvian of the Colonial Period, was Pablo de Olavide. On reaching manhood he went to Spain; there his striking personality and brilliant accomplishments gained for him the friendship of the powerful Conde de Aranda, through whose influence he rose rapidly in political and social life. The rapidity of his rise and the honors that were given him so lavishly aroused much jealousy, so that when he was accused of heresy before the Holy Inquisition because of his sympathy with the French philosophers, he had many enemies ready to attack him. He was convicted and thrown into prison. Escaping, he made his way to France, where he was received with open arms by Voltaire, Diderot and other men of letters; and a few years later the Convention bestowed upon him the title Citizen of the Republic. Later he repented of his free-thinking in religious matters, withdrew from the world and in the disillusioned retirement of his last years devoted himself to literature. His writings were widely read, less for their intrinsic worth than for the interest aroused by his agitated life, the dramatic vicissitudes of his political career, his intellectual and social triumphs. The most important of his literary productions were a treatise in prose, *El Evangelio en triunfo o historia de un filósofo* and a collection of religious poems, *Poemas Cristianos*.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century a notable improvement took place in the intellectual life of Peru. With the expulsion of the

Jesuits in 1767, the censorship of the Church became less strict; the infiltration of new political and philosophical ideas stimulated the studies of scientists and scholars. The institutions of education were reformed and scientific and literary societies came into existence. A good beginning in periodical literature was made by *El Mercurio Peruano*, a notable publication that has continued intermittently down to the present day.

III. WARS OF INDEPENDENCE

In most of the South American countries the struggle for independence was productive of much patriotic poetry and political writing during the years from 1810 to 1825. Such was not the case with Peru. Lima enjoyed many privileges as the capital of the oldest viceroyalty; colonial traditions were most deeply rooted there; the need of political independence was not so keenly felt by the pleasure-loving Limenians, the majority of whom were more interested in social activities, in material and aesthetic pleasures than in political affairs. Had the patriotic leaders in the cause of independence in the other parts of South America not believed that the complete emancipation of the whole continent from Spanish rule was the only basis of permanent independence of any part of it, Peru would have remained for many years a Spanish colony. Peru did not declare its independence until the great Argentine patriot, San Martín, had arrived with his liberating army from the south. Until then the Peruvians who desired independence were helpless in the presence of the strong royalist forces concentrated in their country, the stronghold of Spanish power in America. The vigorous campaign of San Martín, followed by that of the Liberator of the North, Simón Bolívar, brought to a successful conclusion in 1824 the Wars of Independence, gave political freedom to Peru and established the permanent independence of all the Spanish colonies in South America.

Although the great majority of Peruvians were at first indifferent to independence, there were some who were willing to sacrifice their lives to its cause. One of these was a young poet of Arequipa, Mariano Melgar, executed in 1814 in his twenty-third year for the part that he had taken in an unsuccessful rebellion against Spain. He did not live long enough to get beyond the experimental stage, but the fine melody and delicacy of sentiment in his love poems and elegies were such as to give promise of high literary achievement.

He was most successful in his *yaravíes*, written in imitation of the indigenous Inca love poems of the same name.

Peru has a share at least in the glory of the greatest poet of the Wars of Independence, José Joaquín Olmedo, one of the most inspired poets that Spanish America has yet produced. Born in Guayaquil when that city belonged to the Peruvian viceroyalty and educated in the University of San Marcos, he wrote much of his poetry in Peru; but his native city became later part of the Republic of Ecuador, so that Ecuador has now good right to consider him her most illustrious son.

No other writers of the brief period from 1810 to 1825 need be mentioned. With the final withdrawal of Spanish troops from Callao in 1826, the life of Peru as an independent nation began. The fourth period in its literary history, coinciding with the century of national independence, is, as might well be expected, the richest in literary production.

(To be Continued)

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